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Appropriate Development

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind

This book is written by William Kamkwamba, telling his story of creating a windmill at his home in Malawi. William’s family are farmers and when he was about 13 years old Malawi faced an exceedingly harsh famine. The rains came late, and when they finally did come it flooded the fields, then there was no more rain for the rest of the year. The few crops they managed to get only lasted them about half the year. Due to this his family could not afford the financial cost of sending William to secondary school. In Malawi there is no free secondary school. But William was not going to let that stop him from learning.

One of the primary schools had a library, with really only three shelves of books. William had started by checking out books that would hopefully let him keep up with what his peers would have been learning. Then he found two books explaining physics and electrical systems. He loved reading about the way things worked. He talked about how before science, magic was the explanation, but with those books he had a new answer. One day he found a book that had the windmills from Southern California pictured on the cover. That is what gave him the idea.

If he could build a windmill, his family could stay up after dark. They would not have to spend money on kerosene gas for lights and the stove. And he could eventually have it power a water pump that could be used to irrigate his family’s fields so that they could get a second harvest and never have to face famine again. From there he started to find a bunch of scraps that he could use to build his own windmill. It took a long time and the village had thought he had gone crazy. His father had decided to just let him be since he felt terrible about not being able to send his boy to school.

When he finally had enough parts he managed to make a working windmill that could power a light bulb. William didn’t stop there he continued on to figure out how to make his own circuit breaker, light switches, he got lights in all of the rooms of his house, and was able to power a radio so they did not have to buy more batteries, and even figured out how to charge a cousin’s cell phone with it. William did not stop inventing.

One day at a teacher at the primary school asked William if he would come and talk to the kids about electricity and make a small windmill to show the kids, helping to spark an interest in science. It is the windmill that he built with the students at the school that got noticed by more powerful people who could help. An official from the school system saw it and passed on the news from there. William was sent to the TED conference in 2007 to tell his story, as well as to the 2008 World Economic Forum on Africa. Many people came together after hearing his story and helped William achieve the goals he wanted. They helped him go back to school, get proper wiring for his house, and get a water pump to irrigate his family’s fields.

This story was really inspiring of what could happen in Africa. I was amazed at all that William overcame to do what he did. When he spoke at the conferences he talked about the importance of trying. There were some key places in which he gave an idea about what would really help in these poor countries. One is for us to teach each other and work together. He wonders what could be accomplished if he taught his neighbors to build windmills and what else they could build. The other is for them to stop waiting for others to help them. Towards the end of the book he says “Seeing this [referring to all the other stories he’s heard as he’s told his], it gave me the confidence that we Africans can develop our continent if we just put our minds and abundant resources together and stop waiting for others to do it for us” (Kamkwamba \*). William was never discouraged by the fact that he didn’t have the proper parts and wires to make things he found his own solution to do it.

\*I read on the kindle so I do not have a page number to go with this quote